



Land Use Planning and Development Review

INTRODUCTION

Land use planning is a critical element in the function of any transportation system whether it involves automobiles, buses, bicycles, or pedestrians. While land use planning is often associated with governmental entities, land use planning should more appropriately be viewed as the process of setting goals and pursuing these goals in order to achieve certain ends from the use of parcels of land. Private developers often use such words as “access” and “amenities” to describe the manner in which they want their parcels of land to relate with the transportation system.



The goal of land use planning as it relates to transportation is to make sure the supply of transportation (the number and size of roads, the frequency of transit service, etc.) is adequate to meet the demand (the number of people going from one point to another). Without having a “plan” or a knowledge of what to expect from any given parcel of land, it is very difficult to achieve the balance where supply meets demand. Since governments are being pushed by citizens to be more efficient and frugal with taxpayer money, there is seldom excess supply. Thus, unplanned development results in congestion and more accidents. These conditions compromise all modes of travel, creating a situation where people’s preferred mode of travel (auto) and many of the alternatives (transit, bicycling, and walking) all fail at the same time.

When combining land use planning and transit, many people remember only the transit advocate’s point of view—which is more buses, fewer cars. In some cases, this point of view may be appropriate, but it is not the only point of view. The cost-conscious taxpayer should consider the argument that land use planning can help minimize the cost of providing essential public transit service. In addition, public

transit can play a role in preserving the character of historic downtowns and reducing the need for costly parking structures.

In Flathead County, changes in residential development and commercial businesses have occurred outside the city limits. Residential subdivisions are located on the outskirts of town, and commercial development is sprawling to the edge of Kalispell.

DESIGN STRATEGIES

In recent years, there has been a strong interest in the planning profession regarding the strategies by which rural and urban development can be shaped to maximize the efficiency of alternate transportation modes, particularly transit. This field of study has taken on different names in various parts of the country. On the east coast, this field of study is commonly referred to as the “Neo-Traditional Neighborhood Development” (TND) movement. This movement has been championed by academics such as Andreas Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. It is evidenced in such places as the new town of Seaside, Florida and the extensive Kentlands development near Washington, DC. In the West, this field of study has typically been labeled “Transit Oriented Design” (TOD).

There are a number of common design strategies that have been identified through this field of planning research. A key element in the design strategies presented below is an acceptance that automobile use will remain a key part of our transportation system. To that end, the strategies do not strive to eliminate all auto traffic. Rather, the goal is to make transit and other alternative transportation modes as attractive as possible. Each strategy is discussed below.

Cluster Land Use Densities Close to Major Transit Stops

A vital rule of thumb in transit planning is that the potential for transit ridership drops off dramatically with increased distance from the nearest transit stop. Research consistently shows that the proportion of persons willing to use transit drops dramatically beyond a one-quarter mile walking distance to the bus stop (7.5-minute walk at two mph). It therefore follows that the more trip origins and destinations that can be concentrated within approximately one-quarter mile of a

major transit stop, the greater the potential for transit usage. Within the constraints of the real estate market and local housing preferences, therefore, is a benefit in developing zoning classifications and transit services in tandem to ensure that the greatest number of dwelling units, employment opportunities, and institutional/commercial centers are located near major transit stops.

Street Network Should Be Developed to Allow Efficient Transit Service

In order to reduce traffic volumes near residences and avoid the potential for “cut-through” traffic, traffic and land use planners in the period roughly since World War II have commonly designed residential areas with a curvilinear, disconnected street system, so common today in suburban areas. While a bus can be routed along the curvilinear collector or arterial street close to the residences within a subdivision, the walking distance may be excessive because there is no direct access. Connected streets should be provided to permit bus routes into residential neighborhoods.

Convenient Pedestrian and Bicycle Connections to Transit Stops

A key strategy in the TOD design is to ensure that transit passengers can quickly access a bus stop from their trip origin or destination. This strategy recognizes the fact that transit patrons are pedestrians as soon as they leave the bus. To this end, special emphasis is placed upon providing direct and attractive pedestrian and bicycle ways between residential and employment areas and the transit stops, often including pedestrian paths linking cul-de-sacs with nearby transit stops on collector and arterial streets.

Site Design That Serves Both Auto and Transit Users

A quick drive to the nearest Target or Costco shows the result of current commercial site design practices. Auto drivers are provided with a relatively short walk to the front door after parking. The transit passenger is typically dropped off at the street edge, enduring a long walk to and across the parking lot, unprotected from the weather. Current site design of this type rewards auto use and penalizes transit use. Redesigned to cluster the commercial uses near major intersections, however, both auto and transit users could be provided with convenient walking

access to the site. In addition, the “clusters” formed by this site plan would encourage increased walking between buildings for meals, business, errands, etc.

Convenient transit access may take the form of setbacks and parking standards. In addition to minimum setbacks, local ordinances should also specify the allowable maximum setbacks adjacent to the public transportation corridors. The location of parking facilities within the public transportation corridor should also be addressed. Local ordinances should require that parking be provided at the rear or possibly at the side of the building. The front of the building should be oriented to the street, with a specific allowable maximum setback that is close to the street and oriented to public transportation and pedestrians.

Other site design issues relate to the geometry of streets, bus turnouts, shelters, and park-and-ride facilities. Streets which will be designated as bus routes must have adequate turning radii at the intersections. Bus turnouts should be designed with a pavement composition that resists damage by buses. In addition, bus turnouts should be sited in locations that minimize traffic flow interruptions (especially at intersections) and maximize pedestrian access. Bus shelters should be placed approximately four to five feet from the curb edge, and should be located where there is efficient pedestrian access and/or neighborhood commercial nodes. When possible, turnouts and shelters should not be sited on major arterials with high travel speeds. Instead, a nearby collector should be utilized. Park-and-ride facilities should provide an adequate number of bus berths, easy pedestrian access from the parking lots, and a separation of bus and automobile traffic flows.

Buildings, especially commercial and institutional ones, should be constructed to provide access for transit vehicles. Common examples of such buildings are hospitals and hotels. The access that is needed consists of overhead clearance and pull-through driveways. Without these, the transit vehicle must either stop further from the front door of such buildings or be at risk of backing out of dead-end driveways. This was shown to be evident when the Regional Hospital constructed a pull-through driveway at the entrance to one of the facilities that was constructed too

low to allow access for Eagle Transit's buses. Eagle Transit is aware of the issues with site designs and is becoming involved with the process for design review.

APPLYING THE CONCEPTS IN FLATHEAD COUNTY

Existing government policies may work for or against transit development and ridership. Existing zoning may disallow the mix of uses, building designs, and densities most suitable for generating transit ridership and for attracting developers' interests. In addition, public zoning and building provisions may impede the design of convenient connections between development projects and access points. Standards for setbacks and buffering, restrictions on building heights, and density limits must be addressed to work in support of a transit-friendly and pedestrian design. Parking standards frequently fail to support transit ridership.

Actions To Be Addressed in Flathead County

Land use planning and design has a strong relationship with transportation demand and travel patterns. It plays an important role in determining the viability of public transportation and the feasibility of serving portions of the community. Recognizing this important relationship, below is a list of particular enhancements to existing county and municipal land use planning. These enhancements positively impact land use decisions on transportation needs within the local area and support transit within the community.

1. Adopt transit-oriented development design guidelines. Each transit patron is a pedestrian as soon as the individual leaves the bus, so the pedestrian facilities should be emphasized. There should be a relatively small setback from the transit corridor. City and county ordinances should specify a maximum setback within the public transportation corridor. City and county ordinances should require that parking be provided at the rear or side of buildings. The front of the buildings should be oriented to the street with maximum setbacks which are close to the street and oriented to public transportation and pedestrians. Incorporate pedestrian-friendly design guidelines in street design manuals for all new developments. Pedestrian access (paths, trails, or sidewalks) should be provided in the proximity of bus stops to residential developments. Bus stops and sidewalks should connect with other walkways or paths to provide easy access to the residential and commercial development.
2. Promote mixed-use development in redevelopment areas.
3. Emphasize pedestrian orientation with minor or no building setbacks.

4. Focus new development into urban or town centers, although this is difficult due to the fact that Kalispell continues to grow at the urban fringes.
5. Promote a complete network of sidewalks throughout the cities within the urban areas of Flathead County.
6. Require all public and private development projects in the cities within Flathead County to include sidewalks on both sides of the roads, except for freeways. This is something Eagle Transit should encourage within the context of the local planning and development programs in the county.
7. Encourage in-fill and redevelopment by designating underdeveloped or declining neighborhoods for public investment.
8. Provide incentives such as density bonuses or reduced parking requirements for developers who design pedestrian-friendly projects. This may be particularly appropriate as the northern portion of Kalispell continues commercial development at the current pace.
9. In Flathead County's master plans, prioritize new and maintenance road projects based upon how well they serve in-filling development and include transit-friendly infrastructure (bike lanes, sidewalks, bus pullouts, bus pads, and bus stops). The county may be looking at developing a new master plan which may include an impact fee program for new developments. Eagle Transit should advocate that a portion of these fees be set aside for transit-related improvements.